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## **INHABITING THE PUBLIC INTERIOR. AN EXPLORATION INTO THE CRITICAL ROLE OF PERSONALISATION IN IMPARTING QUALITIES TO PUBLIC LIFE.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The ability to connect emotionally to our environment is fundamental to human experience. Architects, designers, urbanists and environmental psychologists have explored spaces from the perspective of experience, to understand why certain places make people feel alive and human, and how to design environments that resonate with human sensibilities. A significant body of research focuses on urban public spaces and shows that the quality of the public realm can impact on place experience, social cohesion and the quality of life in cities. Cities need public spaces that people can connect to emotionally to build liveable communities. As a shared destination, the public interior is fundamental to our experience of the city. Yet, qualitative research on public interiors is fragmented, with few insights on how they can contribute to the quality of human experience. In this context, this paper asks how the public interior can colour public life by providing opportunities for people to personalise spatio-sensory experiences, nurturing emotional relations between people and their environment. The concept of personalisation is characterised by the way in which people can shape their experience of the public interior around their needs and desires to enable them to define personal and group territories. Thus, the research explores the critical role of personalisation in imparting qualities to public life by investigating how the design and management of the public interior can contribute to people's ability to personalise their experience of the interior. It focuses on the public interior of the Royal Festival Hall, a cultural institution in London UK, because its ownership, design and managerial culture present distinctive characteristics that can nurture opportunities for personalisation and enable individuals to comfortably inhabit the public interior.

Keywords: public interior, experience, personalisation, emotion, connection.

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper examines the concept of personalisation in the context of the public interior. It draws on a research project on intimacy in the public interior exploring how individuals can develop positive emotional connections with the environment of the public interior. Experiences generate emotions and Damasio tells us that "emotions are inseparable from the idea of reward and punishment."<sup>1</sup> As such,

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this study posits that personalisation is a positive experience when it is perceived as a reward. The research documents real life experiences of personalisation in the public interior to uncover observable characteristics and explore the critical role of personalisation in imparting qualities to public life.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

Kuksa and Fisher situate personalisation as a principle emerging from “the relative agency of ‘persons’ in different scenarios.”<sup>2</sup> The use of the term relative indicates that a person may have agency but may not be fully in control of the experience. Kuksa and Fisher’s definition is useful, however the study of personalisation in the public interior requires a more specific description. Here, the research draws on Gifford to frame the experiential space of personalisation as a form of positive territoriality<sup>3</sup> to characterise personalisation as the way visitors can shape their experience of the public interior around their needs and desires to define personal and group territories. ‘Personal’ relates to the subjective environmental experience while ‘group’ relates to situations where two or more people share the same event in proximity but nonetheless always experience it subjectively.<sup>4</sup> The concept of group experience is important to this study because it is situated in the public life of the interior where personal territories do not exist independently from one another. Moreover, even an individual who is alone and is not actively interacting with anyone else is still intersubjectively immersed in the experience of the collective context of the public interior. Limiting the study of personalisation to personal and group would however still be too reductive. The concept of personalisation is a little more complex. Kuksa and Fisher distinguish between two types of personalisation, personalisation ‘for’ and personalisation ‘by.’ These types do not exist in a dualistic mode but are effectively two sides of the same coin. They bring together the quality of environmental experience afforded to individuals through the relative agency of the design and management of the environment – personalisation for the individual – and the relative agency individuals can exert on their environment and on their own experience – personalisation by the individual. Personalisation in the public interior is thus characterised as the way design and management impact on individuals’ ability to shape their experience of the interior around their needs and desires to define personal and group territories.

The research centres on the phenomenal character of experiences of personalisation, described by Dretske as “the qualities that determine what it is like to have an experience.”<sup>5</sup> Personalisation is a concept, not the objective property of a space or object. Dretske writes that “a representational theory of experience must distinguish, in representational terms, between an experience of an object’s properties—in the case of vision, its movement, colour, orientation, shape, size, texture, and so on—and a judgment (belief, knowledge) that some object has those properties.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the objective property of a chair may be red while the property of the experience of the chair for the individual may be its redness. Following Dretske’s terminology, the red chair is known as the representational vehicle while its redness is known as the representational content.<sup>7</sup> It is the meaningful redness, the representational content, that is most relevant to this study.

The research also draws on Merleau-Ponty’s theory of embodiment to follow a non-dualistic conception of body and mind, placing the body as the primary means of perception. Merleau-Ponty writes that “all knowledge is established within the horizons opened up by perception”<sup>8</sup>, suggesting that we develop our knowledge of the world through our senses, that the process is always multisensory and usually about more than one object. Hara illustrates how individuals assign significance to their environment by referring to the way babies learn about the world through interrelated multisensory experiences. Although at first, they are not able to grasp the significance of

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sensations, these progressively acquire personal values when “experiences in hearing, touching, seeing, tasting, and smelling acquire meaning all together.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, this study emphasises that personalisation develops through meaningful multisensory experiences.

## RESEARCH SITE SELECTION

Cities need well designed public buildings and spaces, which, according to a report by the UK Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), can “lift your spirit”<sup>10</sup>. A significant body of research on urban public spaces already exists and shows that the quality of the public realm impacts on place experience, social cohesion and the quality of life in cities.<sup>11</sup> As part of the shared destinations that constitute our experience of the city, public interiors can also contribute social values and impart qualities to public life.<sup>12</sup> Yet, with a few notable exceptions such as Poot, Acker and DeVos or Pimlott, the public interior has received limited attention in academic research. Poot et al. indicate that qualitative research on public interiors is fragmented<sup>13</sup>, with few insights on how they can contribute to the quality of human experience. Therefore, selecting the public interior as the focus of a study on personalisation helps consolidate our understanding of how these spaces can impart qualities to public life.

The Royal Festival Hall (RFH) (Figure 1), a cultural venue in London, was selected as the research site for this study following comparative studies amongst public interiors, also in London for parity.



*Figure 1: Built in 1951 by architects Robert Matthews, Leslie Martins, Peter Moro and Edwin Williams, the Royal Festival Hall is located on the South bank of the River Thames in London.*

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The RFH was selected as the most suitable site for this study for the following reasons:

- It is publicly funded.<sup>14</sup>
- It is freely accessible to all, all day, seven days a week.
- It incorporates a variety of spaces and activities with significantly different environmental experiences.
- The practice of architect Peter Moro who oversaw the design of its interior was defined by a sensitivity to human sensibilities.<sup>15</sup>
- The RFH is well known for its popularity with Londoners.<sup>16</sup>
- It has been dubbed ‘a people’s palace’ considered to be non-elitist and generous.<sup>17</sup>

Hence, the RFH was identified as an exemplar amongst public interiors in London. However, it is important to emphasise that this is not a study about the RFH but that the public interior of the RFH was identified as the most suitable location for the research.

## CASE STUDY RESEARCH DESIGN

Thomas presents the case study as a valid tool in qualitative research, allowing the researcher to work with a restricted sample to carry out an in depth inquiry on a case, and gain a rich and detailed understanding<sup>18</sup>. In this study, the method of inquiry is transactional because the researcher is directly involved in the research. Hyett, Kenny and Dickson-Swift advocate “[a]n interpretive or social constructivist approach to qualitative case study research [to support] a transactional method of inquiry, where the researcher has a personal interaction with the case.”<sup>19</sup> This study is also structured as a collective instrumental case study because even though the study only involves one case, the public interior of the RFH is subdivided into study areas called ‘nested elements’.<sup>20</sup> This distinction helps break down the research site into specific and manageable parts while instrumental refers to the objective of the study in providing insights on experiences of personalisation in the public interior. The building has six levels in total and publicly accessible spaces include areas originally designated as foyers, galleries and promenades located underneath and around the auditorium on levels 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. The areas selected for this research are on level 2, 3 and 5 (Figure 2). These nested elements were selected following three main criteria:

- Their consistency in availability to visitors.
- Their popularity with visitors.
- Each provides a significantly different experience.

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Figure 2: The subdivision of the study site into nested elements allows for the collection of data from different experiential environments, thus providing richer data.

## DISCUSSION OF INSIGHTS

It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed account of the entire body of research and findings. Instead, the discussion focuses on key findings from the analysis to illustrate observable characteristics of personalisation and determine how the design and management of the interior, personalisation for visitors, can contribute to experiences of personalisation by visitors. For instance, the study of the design of the public interior of the RFH indicates that porosity is a characteristic of ‘personalisation for’ and privateness and exploration as corresponding characteristics of ‘personalisation by’. The study of managerial practices on the other hand suggests looseness as a characteristic of ‘personalisation for’ and appropriation and customisation as a characteristic of ‘personalisation by’. In this paper, the discussion of insights focuses on porosity, privateness and exploration.

### Personalisation for: porosity

Porosity occurs when an interior integrates porous edges in its design. The study draws on principles of urban design defined by Sennett to distinguish between two types of edges: borders and boundaries<sup>21</sup>. Borders are porous edges, maintaining an open flow between inside and out, while boundaries are solid barriers such as walls. In the public interior of the RFH, porous edges exist between inside and out but also within the interior. In nested element 2 for instance, open riser staircases and cantilevered platforms with glass balustrades create an abundance of porous edges. Figure 3 illustrates a popular vantage point in the RFH. It is relatively common to see visitors standing there, watching and listening to the spectacle of the interior.



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*Figure 3: Vantage point in nested element 2 showing how the design of the interior integrates porous edges and open sensory flows.*

Although not all vantage points need to be looking down onto a space below, Alexander et al. explain that “[t]he instinct to climb up to some high place, from which you can look down and survey your world, seems to be a fundamental human instinct.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, porosity can facilitate open flows between the different parts of the interior and, in the context of this study, open flows are understood as open sensory flows because they are experienced through the senses. Visitors remain connected to the rest of the space through sight, sounds and smells. Sensory open flows are documented and analysed in this research using a sensory flow diagram (Figure 4), a tool developed by the author in a previous study<sup>23</sup> and adapted to this research as a way to illustrate embodied experiences of porosity, the perceived qualities in the environment experienced through sight, haptic sight, sounds and smells. Touch and kinaesthesia are not included because the study of open sensory flows is concerned with the senses of distance rather than proximity. Accordingly, the diagram includes haptic sight to reference the tactile and chromatic qualities of materials sensed through sight. For instance, whether a material is perceived as soft or hard, warm or cool or smooth or rough will impact on the kind of qualities individual assign to their environment. Le Breton (2017, p. 34) references this phenomenon as the haptic way of seeing. The terminology included in the diagram (Figure 2) - Stimulating-Calming, Inviting-Distancing, Lively-Quiet, Evocative-Indeterminate - expresses a way to describe how individuals perceive qualities in the environment. A range of qualities was identified in the first iteration of the data analysis and the findings were regrouped into categories to determine which qualities were most significant. They do not represent a good versus bad dualistic perspective but a scale of qualitative phenomena, recognising the notion that sensory phenomena are fluid and changeable states and that perceptions will vary across individuals and situations. Thus, the sensory flow diagram provides a starting point to explore how individuals can experience porosity in the environment across a variation of situations, facilitating comparative studies between different times and vantage points.

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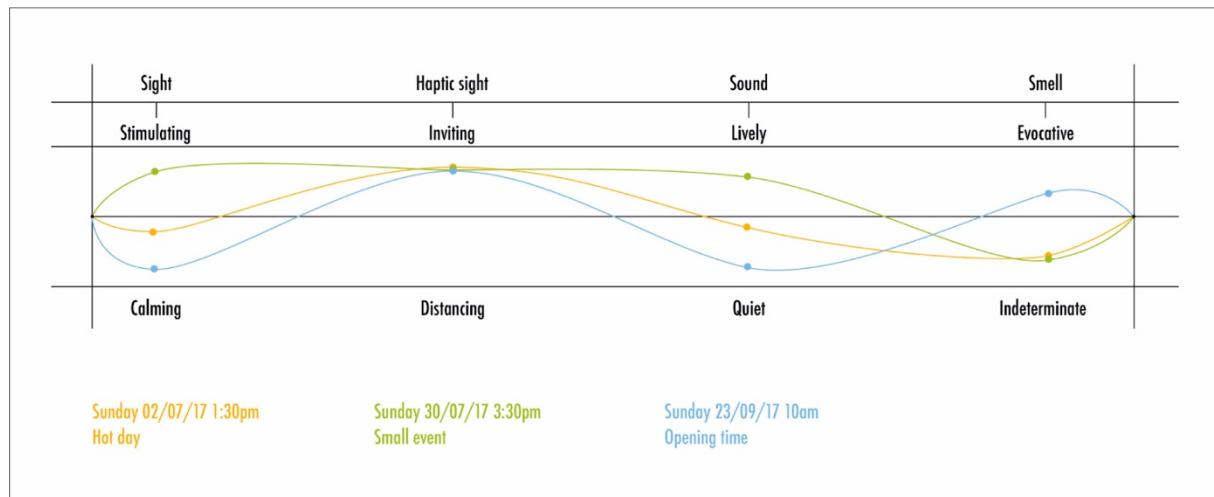


Figure 4: Documentation of embodied experiences of open sensory flows from the vantage point shown in Figure 3. The diagram illustrates three different situations, all on Sundays for parity. It shows variations across sight, sounds and smells while haptic sight remains constant.

Porosity creates opportunities for vantage points to articulate the interior because porosity creates opportunities for visitors to pause, observe the spectacle of activities around them and get a sense of the entire interior. Tuan<sup>24</sup> identifies pause as one of the conditions necessary “for a locality to become the centre of felt values” while Whyte talks about people wanting to be part of the life of the space to be connected to others<sup>25</sup>. As such, vantage points, pause and spectacle are identified as spatial and social elements underpinning experiences of porosity in the public interior. Porosity enables visitors to feel part of and invited into the public life of the interior.

## Personalisation by: privateness

Porosity can contribute to privateness, identified in this research as a characteristic of personalisation by visitors. The term privateness draws on terminology used by Alexander, Ishikawa and Silverstein<sup>26</sup>. It is preferred to privacy because privacy may suggest a complete withdrawal from others, while privateness can still exist in the context of a collective environment. Privateness means that visitors may define semi-secluded territories that have special qualities to them personally. However, embodied experiences of privateness are not wholly subjective, they are also intersubjective. According to Abram, this means that even though experiences are subjective, we are nonetheless able to recognise the reality of other experiencing subjects<sup>27</sup>. Porosity enriches intersubjectivity. As porous edges connect visitors to the wider context of the interior through open sensory flows, visitors’ attention fluctuates from their immediate environment to phenomena around them through sensing. This is why the term privateness is more appropriate than privacy. The need to define semi-secluded territories is explained by Hildebrand who assert that people tend to prefer secure and protected settings<sup>28</sup>. Observations and informal discussions with visitors showed that this is an important quality but also that visitors still prefer to maintain a connection with the public life of the interior. The example in Figure 5 illustrates the concept of privateness. It depicts a situation where a visitor is sitting between two columns, reading. He has identified an opportunity in the design of the interior and has moved a chair from another area to create a personal territory. The columns create protective solid boundaries while the space is otherwise open to visual, acoustic and olfactive flows. Although nested,



The design of the interior integrates circulation devices called promenades (Figure 6). They create opportunities for free exploratory movement and for visitors to experience the interior from multiple sensory perspectives. Because of their porosity the three-dimensional elements can, as Grafe explains, “emphasise the effect of the vast expanse of space, apparently entirely designed for walking about and

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enjoying the changing perspectives, rather than reaching a specific destination.”<sup>32</sup> The interior is designed to encourage exploration and as such provides visitors with a degree of agency. Visitors can personalise their experience because they can choose to an extent how they move through the interior. Observations show that many meander, looking up and sideways as they walk, observing, with no obvious destination in mind, seemingly allowing their senses to guide them. The interior becomes “an environment through which to travel.”<sup>33</sup>



*Figure 6: View of the promenades in the open plan interior of nested element 2 showing how it is designed to encourage movement.*

The concept of exploration as a form of personalisation by visitors is significant for two reasons. Firstly, because exploration is a form of approach behaviour,<sup>34</sup> a way for people to become intimate with their environment as they move through it. Secondly, because people who explore walk slowly. Sennett explains that “[...] walking slowly produces a deeper lateral consciousness than moving fast. Lateral accounting is one of the criteria for distinguishing place - a site in which you dwell - from space - a site you move through.”<sup>35</sup> Sennett places lateral consciousness as an outcome of peripheral vision, which gives us richer information about our environment than focused vision. Accordingly, the faster the motion, the flatter the environmental experience, while on the other hand, as visitors meander through the public interior of the RFH, a deep lateral consciousness generates sensory nourishment and a richer quality of environmental experience.

## CONCLUSION

While existing studies of personalisation primarily focus on products and services, this study expands the concept of personalisation into experiential space to explore observable characteristics of personalisation in the public interior. Insights from the research highlight interrelations between design, management and visitor agencies, governed by a symbiotic relationship between the notions of personalisation for visitors and personalisation by visitors. In the context of this research, personalisation is thus characterised as the way the design and management of the public interior can

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nurture visitors' ability to define personal and group territories. This paper introduced two characteristics of 'personalisation for', porosity and looseness, and provided a detailed account of the concept of porosity, with privateness and exploration as corresponding characteristics of 'personalisation by'. In response to the question 'how can personalisation in the public interior impart qualities to public life?', the research uncovered a number of outcomes, highlighting how the public interior can colour public life by providing opportunities for visitors to personalise spatio-sensory experiences, fostering emotional connections between visitors and their environment. The research suggests that through personalisation visitors can develop more intimate connections with the public interior, for visitors to inhabit the public interior and for personalisation to contribute to emotional wellness. The public interior selected for this research provides an interesting range of environmental experiences and richness in data. Further research will help consolidate and expand the work presented here, and the intention is to structure the findings into an experiential framework towards the design and management of public interiors, to cultivate the integration of personalisation as a desirable characteristic of the visitor experience in the public interior. The framework will be open and adaptable to other contexts, thus ensuring the transferability of the research from the public interior of the RFH into other public interiors.

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